

THE PASTORAL OFFICE

by P. F. Bresee (1838-1915)

Historical introduction by Carl Bangs, Professor of Historical Theology, St. Paul's Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri.

This essay on "The Pastoral Office" was delivered by Rev. P. F. Bresee at an 1881 statewide convention of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Iowa. Bresee, later to be perhaps the principal founder of the Church of the Nazarene, was one of some two dozen speakers at the three-day meeting of the four Annual Conferences of the state. The convention was a decennial event for "mutual and Godly counsel" and for coordination of the work of the conferences. The papers dealt with administration, program, current issues, and spiritual concerns.

Bresee had begun his ministry at age 18, in 1857, as assistant to the minister of the Marengo Circuit. He matured rapidly in spirit and effectiveness. At age 25 he was a presiding elder and at age 33 a delegate to General Conference. He had edited a conference paper and had held office in most of the conference boards and committees, being particularly interested in the work of colleges and seminaries. His chief love, however, was the pastorate. And at the time of the convention of 1881 he was the minister at Creston.

His paper on "The Pastoral Office" was unique among those presented at the convention. Many of the papers were reports on church statistics and administrative procedures. Some had to do with departments of the church—Sunday schools, women's missionary societies, and educational

institutions. Others dealt with public issues, which at that time were temperance, Sabbath observance, and the press.

Bresee's paper was preceded by an earnest but backward-looking appeal for the retention of the class meeting. His paper was followed by a second address by another minister on the pastoral office—an uninspired pep talk on how to be a denominational functionary.

Bresee operated on a loftier plane. The pastoral office, for him, centers in the twin ministries of evangelism and education. It is the pastor's particular task to seek the salvation of those who are in that "large borderland where the Church and the world meet and mingle." It is equally important to be a "teacher of the Word of Truth to the whole Church." The church is, indeed, a university, with the pastor for president.

The unity and power of pastoral evangelism and education stem from the pastor's own moral character as it is motivated by the spiritual power of the gospel. "A true conception of this work," he says, "can only be drawn from the work of the Son of God."

Some of the pathos of Bresee's own life can be seen between the lines. A pastor "may be obliged to do other things," and duty may put the pastor to "caring for afflicted loved ones, providing for the aged and in-

firm." Bresee was still in the midst of his involvement with Mexican mining stock, and he had taken on the care of his own aging parents. It was a situation that the underpaid Methodist clergy of the day could well understand. Bresee makes it plain that when a pastor takes on such outside interests they must be, like Paul's tent-making, "not for bread and butter, but that he may preach Jesus Christ."

Now, nearly 100 years later, Bresee's essay continues to speak with fresh challenge. The pastor is to be one who is thrilled with divine truth, aware of its unexplored depths, and sensible of its infinite glory, a large-souled person, embracing all classes of people—and especially the poor and despised, able to bear crushing burdens because of a clear sense of calling in union with Jesus Christ.

The papers of the convention were published in Burlington, Iowa, in **Proceedings of the Second Iowa Methodist State Convention, Held at Des Moines Iowa, May 31, June 1 and 2, 1881.** I came across this book while doing research on Bresee in preparation for the H. Orton Wiley Lectures in Theology at Point Loma College in 1977. I am indebted to the Library of the Iowa State Department of History and Archives for bringing the book to my attention and for making the text of Bresee's essay available for republication.

"IT IS NOT SO DIFFICULT TO KNOW WHAT TO PREACH AS TO BE IN CONDITION SO THAT THE HOLY GHOST CAN PREACH THROUGH US."

I suppose it is the design that I should say a few things in reference to the work to which we are called as Christian pastors, and the best conditions in which each pastor, in his own way, can do this work. The office is nothing only as it represents the work to be done, and each man, animated by the same spirit, must do this work somewhat in his own way. As Dr. Parker has intimated that it is not so difficult to know what to preach as to be in condition so that the Holy Ghost can preach through us—so in all our work the details of how it shall be done are not so important as to be in condition so that we may be an efficient agent through whom the Holy Spirit may work.

The work of the pastor embraces all departments of the work of the Christian ministry. While we sometimes speak of evangelists, and teachers, and pastors, still the work of the pastor embraces, in a large degree, all classes of work. He must do the work of an evangelist. He must teach all men who sit under his ministry. He must feed the flock of God with tenderest care, providing for the sheep and the lambs.

In this day when there is a large border-land where the Church and the world meet and mingle, where those who are not Christians, yet permeated largely with Christian thought and Christian principle, sit in our sanctuaries and abide in our homes, and when just outside of this circle there are large numbers almost under the shadow of our church who are devoid of all Christian life, there must enter into the pastor's work very much of the evangelist. Much of his ministry must have a more or less direct tendency to save these souls. The pastor must be always evangelistic. It would seem to be a poor ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ that was not an evangel to unsaved men. It would seem a very barren ministry that gathered no souls to the crop. And no special evangelist can take the place or do this work for the pastor.

He must also be a consistent teacher. Every church is a school, and those which are fully organized and equipped may not inaptly be termed universities, with the pastor for president. But he is even more than this, for he must be a teacher of teachers as well as a consistent teacher of all. He must in many ways be adding skill to the hands which labor, imparting knowledge to many of those who are fellow workers, bringing out those who have the latent faculty for teaching, and training them for the work. He occupies the office of teacher of the Word of Truth to the whole Church.

He has been called to this office because he is a seer. Because whichever way he turns he has eyes to see. Because his gaze is further in the azure and deeper into the depths of truth, especially such truth as pertains to the redemption, salvation, and perfection of the souls of men, than those around him; and seeing, he brings it nigh and gives it voice, so that others hear and see, and rejoice in the same great truth. Men teach us science and art, because they see further than we, and are thus able to direct us.

So it is the mission of Christian pastors by steady

gaze and the teachings of the Divine Spirit, to see further along these lines of Christian truth, until bathed in its light, and rejoicing in its power, they tell it to others. And though this science is not in its empirical period, still it may not be learned by rote, and taught, as possibly some sciences may. Everywhere are there unexplored depths, and it is only as we gaze into these depths, and come with the sense of their infinite glory fresh upon us, that we can teach them efficiently to others.

The pastor is a perennial fountain of moral influence and power. Whether it goes forth from his public ministrations, or in gentler flow from the influences of his personal presence, wherever, and in whatever way he touches society, he imparts to it of his own moral spiritual life. It is this moral force that goes forth from the pastor that is more than anything else the measure of his power, and the criterion of his usefulness. He may have knowledge of the truth and gifts to proclaim it, and be apt to teach, yet if truth has not so permeated him with her rarest glory, so that he imparts a moral power, which makes his own unseen life draw men and impel them with its own power towards Christ and heaven, his ministry will be largely fruitless.

A gentleman who used to reside in this city, but has taken up his abode in the city of Jasper, a gentleman of the broadest culture and sweetest spirit, said to me one day that he did not attend upon the service of the sanctuary so much to be taught, as to be impelled. Most of us need to be taught; all of us need to be impelled. It is for this, as much as anything, that we need a human agent.

One who, heated and strengthened in his own moral life, imparts it to others. A man who, seeing truth is not thrilled by it, to whose cheek it brings no glow, and who imparts only the truth to others, is not fitted to be a Christian teacher. The truth working in him mightily, creates a moral force which makes his teaching a moral power.

In order to accomplish this work of evangelizing and teaching and imparting moral strength, there are some facts and essential conditions of manhood which may be won or developed, which it may be well to advert to.

A pastor must be a large-souled man. We sometimes speak of men as being whole-souled. This does not seem to be correct, for it seems to indicate that some men have only a fraction, and we almost feel justified from the smallness of the amount. But the correct way is to say large-souled. Some men seem to be nearly all soul, the body only the base of operations. They are full and surrounded, ensphered in an almost boundless soul. The pastor needs to be large enough to take to his heart all classes of men, whatever their relation to him; those who oppose him as well as themselves, and he stands especially near to the poor and the despised.

There must be in him such a fullness of the Christly spirit that it is impossible for him to become acrid or disaffected. He will have enemies to deal with as well as friends, and his heart must be large

enough to love them all. He will often be in surroundings not congenial, and possibly sometimes where he thinks he should not have been placed. He must be so filled with the Christly spirit, that with sweetness and humility he meets all the difficulties and trials of his work.

He must have a clear conviction that God has called him to this work. There should be no haste nor rashness in entering upon this office. In our Church there is none. We obey the apostolic injunction to "lay hands suddenly on no man." This conviction of the Divine call to this work should be so settled that it need never be reviewed. There are difficulties, trials and temptations in this work, which to overcome a man will need to feel God calls me to it. There are burdens to be borne of almost crushing weight, which are never to be laid down from one year's end to the other, and he needs to feel such a union with the Lord Jesus Christ in the work that he can lay both the burden and himself in His all-loving arms.

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There is often such a sense of humiliation in view of the utter inadequacy of our feeble efforts to meet the necessities of the times and the occasion, that we would often fain lay down the work for stronger and abler hands. I suppose my own experience is not dissimilar to others. I have often gone home on a Sabbath night feeling heartsick over my inability to preach the gospel as it ought to be preached, and feeling I could never look the congregation in the face again. A man needs, under circumstances like these, a clear sense of his call of God to the work.

Uncertainty is always an element of weakness, and never more so than in this most difficult work. There must be something of a comprehension of the greatness of the work to which we are called. Any man that has a low or inferior idea of the pastoral office, will not be likely to succeed in it. He who does not regard this as the highest work, that which of all others he loves the best; that which he would choose if all paths were open to him, has not the spirit of the true pastor. This work to him is far above all worldly places, or power, or gains. He may be obliged to do other things, but it is that he may do this.

Paul made tents, but it was not for the sake of the tents, but that he might preach the gospel; that was the great end, that was the one thing he had in

view, all others were subsidiary to that. So with the minister of Christ; he may be obliged to turn sometimes to the making of the tent and the other, that those God has given him in sacred trust suffer not; that he may not be classed among those who are worse than infidels. But it is not for the bread and butter, but that he may preach Jesus Christ.

This is not a work of convenience to be taken up and laid down as we may or may not have other work to do. It is no special sign that a man is called to the Christian pastorate because he has nothing to do, or has failed in other things. Men are called and sanctified to this work from their youth, and he who would lightly lay it down for worldly emoluments or place, has little conception of it. Duty, high and imperative, the same voice that called him to it, may bid him turn in part, or even wholly from it; caring for afflicted loved ones, providing for the aged and infirm, may compel him, but even then, it seems to me, it will be the sorrow of a true pastor's life.

A true conception of this work can only be drawn from the work of the Son of God. We must stand in the shadow of the Cross—we must see that Cross lifted through the centuries, until it stands erect on Calvary, and as we gaze upon that dying Christ, and see the glory of the love of God in that marred face—waiting here, the true pastor learns the value of men, and as Christ asks, "Whom shall I send?" he says, "Here am I, send me." And Jesus says: "As the Father hath sent me, so send I you." Receiving thus his commission from Jesus Christ, bedewed with His tears and bathed with His blood, it enters in and takes possession of his soul, and he feels that "'Tis all my business here below to cry, Behold the Lamb."

There is ever before the pastor a vivid sense of the need of those to whom he ministers. To me it is one of the most overwhelming views of the work of the Christian pastor to look into the faces of those to whom we minister, and think of their need. There is that aged man, seeking the ripening influences of the gospel; there is the desolate heart of that bereaved widow, who seeks through the ministry of the Word some strength to bear her burden of sorrow and care; there is the man of business, burdened and half heartsick, he waits to be led out under the fairer skies of unfading verities; the forsaken, forlorn, hopeless, as well as those full of hope, whose hope may be false; many that have sorrow and trouble you know not of; and little children. When the Word is preached, evidently some hear that will never hear again; some that are in the valley of decision. And the pastor's words, whether spoken in the pulpit or home circle, more than the words of any other, are to be cherished, and producing an abiding influence moulding destiny. This will doubtless bring a heavy sense of responsibility, but no man can be a pastor, either in the pulpit or out of it, who does not feel this responsibility, and who does not feel that "I must feed and strengthen all these, and reinforce them in their moral life." "Blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when he cometh, shall find so doing."